

PONY EXPRESS. Daring horseback riders of the pony
Express once carried United States mail between St.

Joseph, Mo., and Sacramento, Calif. The mail then was taken by steamer to San Francisco, Calif. The service began on April 3, 1860. Its promoters meant to prove that the central route followed by the pony express was better than the longer southern route used by the stagecoaches of the Butterfield Overland Mail. Senator William M. Gwin of California was the chief promoter of the pony express. A freight firm, known as Russell, Majors, and Waddell, backed the project.

The pony express route followed the well-known Oregon-California Trail, along the Platte River in Nebraska, through South Pass in Wyoming. At Fort Bridger, Wyo., the riders left the emigrant trail, swung to the south of the Great Salt Lake, and then headed due west across the salt desert to the Sierra Nevada mountains at Carson City, Nev. This route saved over 100 miles (160 kilometers). Relay stations stood 10 to 15 miles (16 to 24 kilometers) apart along the route. Lonely keepers maintained the stations and ponies.

Young pony express riders rode at top speed from one station to the next. As the rider approached the station, the keeper brought out a fresh horse, which was saddled and ready to travel. The rider jumped from his horse, grabbed the mail bags, and was on his way again in two minutes' time. Usually each man rode 75 miles (121 kilometers). But if a rider could not carry the mail, the first rider kept going. There were about 190 stations, 400 keepers and assistants, 400 horses, and 80 riders.

Pony express riders earned \$100 to \$150 a month. Riders usually carried only two revolvers and a knife as defense against attacks by Indians and bandits. They rode day and night in all kinds of weather. The mail was lost only once in the 650,000 miles (1,050,000 kilometers) ridden by the pony express.

Riders carried the mail in leather, rainproof pouches, strapped to the front and back of the saddle. The postage rate, at first \$5 a half ounce, later became \$1. The mail never weighed over 20 pounds (9 kilograms).

The first pony express trip took 10 days to cover the

distance of 1,966 miles (3,164 kilometers). Later trips were made in eight or nine days. This was 12 or 14 days shorter than the time required by the Overland Mail. Once the mail was carried from Fort Kearny, Nebr., to Fort Churchill, Nev., in six days, a record. The rider on this trip carried the news of Abraham Lincoln's election in November, 1860. On short stretches, riders occasionally rode 25 miles (40 kilometers) per hour. Nearly 250 miles (402 kilometers) a day was normal.

The pony express ended on Oct. 24, 1861. There was no need for it, because the telegraph now stretched from coast to coast. The promoters of the pony express were ruined financially.

W. TURBENTINE JACKSON

See also WESTERN FRONTIER LIFE (Communication); NEBRASKA (picture: Pony Express Station); KANSAS (Places to Visit [Hollenberg Station]).

Oil painting on canvas (1900); Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Okla.

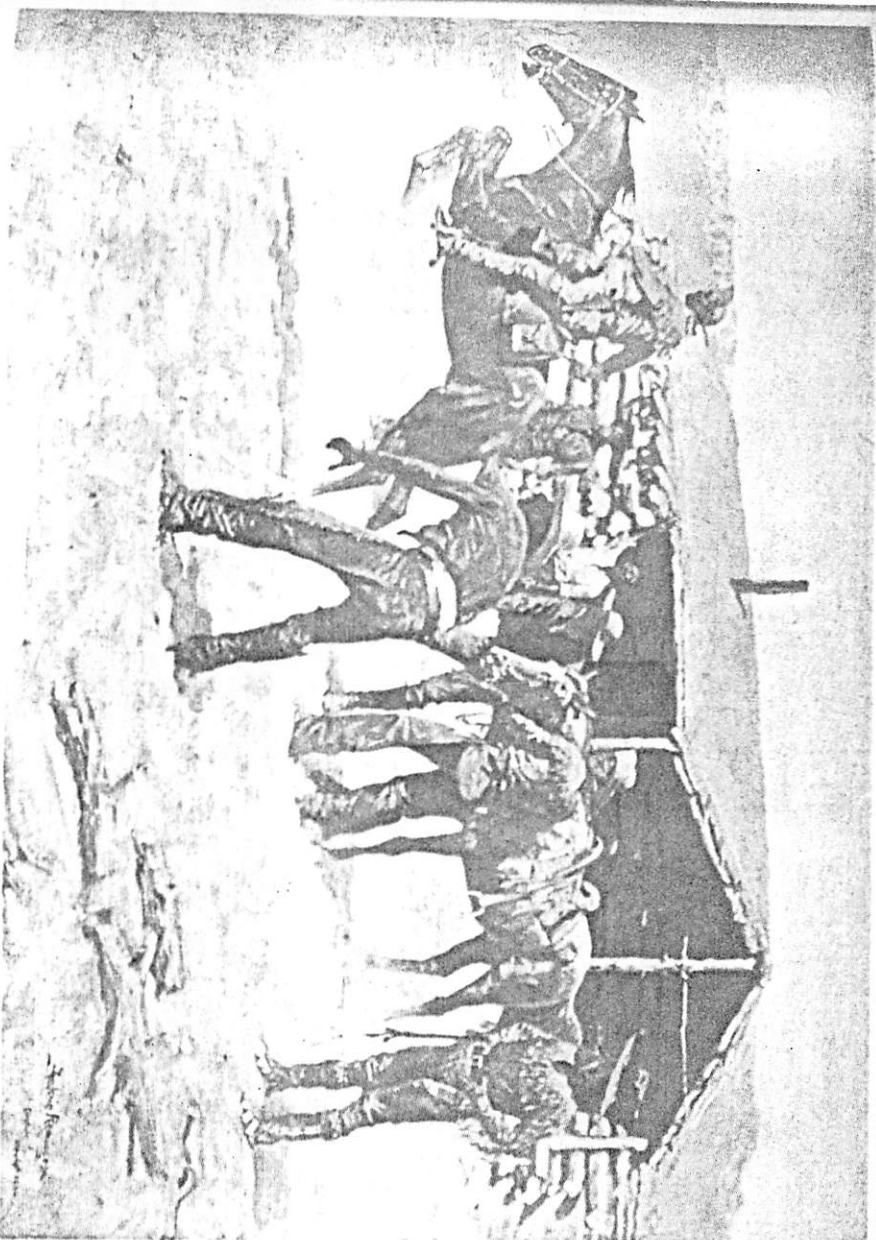


A Pony Express Rider switches to a fresh mount and begins another step of his dangerous dash across the West. The American artist Frederic Remington captured this scene in his painting, *The Coming and Going of the Pony Express*.

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